

## WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED. VOCI E MUSICHE DAGLI STATI UNITI (1969-2018)

**Alessandro Portelli** (author)

Roma: Squilibri, 2019, pp. 339, ISBN: 9788885571259

Reviewed by Bruno Walter Renato Toscano

In his latest book, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, the historian Alessandro Portelli describes the history of American radicalism through some audio tracks collected during his research stays in the United States. Starting from the Appalachian coal mines' music tradition, the reader/listener is taken through folk music of the Latin American community of Berkeley, the workers' songs of the Washington trade union demonstrations, and the voices of the young crowd that protested against gun violence in 2018. As Portelli writes, "We shall not be moved is the leitmotiv of this whole collection: it is the expression of the persistent resistance of ordinary people, workers, farmers, African Americans, Latinos" (74). In line with this remark, two elements are central to understand Portelli's book. On the one hand, the author aims at describing American society in its complexity. The book does so through both a class analysis and taking into the differences of gender and race within different social groups. On the other hand, the narrative structure of the book itself is based on the oral expressions of the "common people" involved in political and social movements. In this sense, Portelli, as already shown in his previous scholarship, gives an oral and written dignity to all those lesser-known political and social expressions, which are rooted in the history of American communities and in American history in general. Although there are also audio recordings by leading musicians of American music culture—such as Marvin Gaye, Barbara Dane or Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick—in most cases the selected interviews and audio tracks are the political and cultural expressions resulting both from communities with which the author has had direct contact and from the indistinct masses gathered in chorus during the protest parades, from the 1960s until 2018.

Portelli arranges the collection—which includes 4 audio CDs that make up the core of the work—following an order that emphasizes the memory of the social actors involved in the recordings. The memory shared by ordinary women and men is therefore the key element of the narrative of *We Shall Not Be Moved* and it is a deliberately political and radical memory, that places the analyzed subjects and communities within their historical context. Indeed, Portelli presents radicalism as an integral part of American social movements since the late 1960s, permeating American music and cultural heritage. Investigating the political value of American music culture, in this sense, means to face a long-lasting tradition that reinterprets the biblical language rooted "within the veins of [American] culture" (134), the founding myths of the United States, the political ideologies, the cultural

representations, the stylistic features, and the music traditions in order to build new meanings for the historical past of the United States. From this point of view, the continuous return to the roots of U.S. historical identity is nothing more than an attempt by the subjects under analysis to seize the relevance of the past, reconstructing its forms and thus conveying new political values. It does not mean that these oral manifestations are flattened for the advantage of just one narration. Portelli instead puts the audio tracks together without trying to insert them into a whole interpretation tending to a well-defined conclusion. He leaves the reader the task to compose the pieces like a mosaic, making up the complex framework of American radicalism.

Unlike his previous works, in *We Shall Not Be Moved*, Portelli avoids the classical narrative structure of the essay, combining audio tracks and comments in four fundamental parts—songs related to Trade Union and radical struggles, very often linked to folk and country music (CD 1); blues music and ballads that revisit songs and sounds at the roots of U.S. musical traditions (CD 2); songs that reflect religious themes typical of gospel (CD 3); music, choirs, and recordings already published in the book *L’America della contestazione* (Portelli, 1970), to which are added two audio tracks collected in 2018 (CD 4).

If we analyze the work from a historiographic point of view, we can look at the text as a support for historians dealing with oral history, given the strong anthological component that creates a series of sources contextualized but not included in a much broader narrative. An innovative element is certainly the author’s attempt to look at the radicalism in some of the songs of American workers during the 1960s from the point of view of the Italian political and musical experience during those same years. This is the case, for example, of the song *I Hate the Capitalist System* by Sarah Ogan Gunning, which gives an opportunity to reflect on how “it was not true that the United States were a country without class struggle, as almost all the Italian left-wing believed (being convinced that American workers were ‘integrated’ with the crumbs of imperialism)” (258-259).

One of the merits of *We Shall Not Be Moved* is a narrative structure capable of synthesizing the history of American traditional music from the bottom up, thanks to the oral testimonies recorded by the author. On the other hand, it is difficult to capture an overall picture from *We Shall Not Be Moved* because of Portelli’s choice not to give a real guideline.

Unlike Benjamin Filene (2000) or Ricky Vincent (2013), who investigated the relationship between memory, history, political radicalism, and music culture in the United States, Portelli avoids inserting the audio tracks in a narrative that relates the oral tradition of “gospel, narrative songs” (260) within a broader history of American radicalism. Rather, in *We Shall Not Be Moved*, there is a lack of in-depth analysis to connect sources; indeed, individual audio tracks and comments associated with them are arranged by Portelli without explicitly indicating the reason for such provision.

Although the choice of the title of the work is justified as “the expression of the persistent resistance of ordinary people” (74), the main aims of the book, instead, are never

mentioned, neither in the short introduction, nor throughout the text. Portelli leaves room only for comments, tracks, a photographic apparatus that composes the last part of the book, and the stories that led Portelli to relate to the object of each piece. Although the sources collected by Portelli respect the principle of oral history, according to which “oral sources are not found by the historian, but built in his presence, with his direct and decisive participation” (Portelli 2008), the same cannot be said about the narrative. Indeed, what drives the meaning of the work is the expressive immediacy of the audio tracks recorded by Portelli. But the overall analysis of the sources collected and the direct relationship “between the historian as a listener” and the “narrator as a witness” (Portelli 2008) seems to be missing. Nevertheless, the anthology appears to be addressed both to a non-specialized audience and historians. Through *We Shall Not Be Moved*, indeed, the audience outside academia has the possibility to enjoy the audio tracks recorded by Portelli, and the historians could, at the same time, use the book as an anthology in order to investigate American music history and its multiple political meanings.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Filene, Benjamin. 2000. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.

Portelli, Alessandro. 2008. “Un lavoro di relazione. Osservazioni sulla storia orale.” <http://aisoitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Alessandro-Portelli-Storia-orale-un-lavoro-di-relazione.pdf>

Portelli, Alessandro and Pellegrini Ferdinando. 1970. *L’America della contestazione*. I Dischi del Sole: Lp.

Vincent, Ricky. 2013. *Party Music: The Inside Story of the Black Panthers' Band and How Black Power Transformed Soul Music*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

**Bruno Walter Renato Toscano** graduated in History and Oriental Studies in March 2019 at the University of Bologna with a thesis in History of Political Thought entitled “Revolution and Reformism in Babylon. The American Revolution of the Black Panther Party (1966-1972).” In 2018 he was a Visiting Research Fellow at UC Berkeley and Stanford University. He is currently a PhD student in the Department of Civilization and Forms of Knowledge at the University of Pisa. His PhD project aims at investigating the history of African American feminism during the Cold War through a transnational lens.